

*On the Immediate Retribution of Good and Evil Because
of Giving No Alms and Freeing Living Beings¹*

In the reign of Emperor Shōmu, there lived a wealthy man in the village of Sakata, Kagawa district, Sanuki province 讃岐國香川郡坂田里.² He and his wife had the same surname Aya no kimi 綾君.³ Next door to them lived an old widow and an old widower⁴ without any family. They were extremely poor, having no clothes to wear nor food to eat. They used to come to the Aya no kimi's home to beg food at every meal. Once, out of curiosity, the husband got up secretly late at night, boiled rice, and fed his family,⁵ but even then they appeared. All the family wondered about them.

The mistress said to her husband, "This man and woman are too old to work. I should like to have them in our household just for mercy's sake." Then he said, "If you want to feed them, give them some of your portion. The most meritorious deed of all is to save others by sacrificing one's own flesh. What I recommend to you will bring forth merit."

According to the master's suggestion, people in the household fed the old couple with part of their own portions. Among the household there was one servant who disliked the couple in spite of the master's words, however. Gradually other servants learned to dislike them and did not give them food. The mistress, therefore, fed them secretly from her portion. The troublesome servant falsely represented the matter to the master, saying, "Hungry and exhausted, we cannot work well in the field and are neglectful, for the mistress feeds the old ones by decreasing our portions." The mistress, however, kept them in food, even while the servant continued to slander her.

It happened that the ill-tempered servant went to sea to fish with a fisherman.⁶ He saw ten oysters on the fishing rope, and he said to the

fisherman, "I would like to free these oysters." But the fisherman would not agree. Whereupon his companion pleaded earnestly, trying to convey Buddhist teachings to the fisherman, and argued, "Pious people build temples, so why do you object so much to freeing the oysters?" Eventually the fisherman yielded and said, "I want two and a half bushels⁷ of rice in exchange for the ten oysters." Having paid the fisherman, he invited a monk to give a blessing and had the oysters returned to the sea.

One day the benefactor of the oysters went to the mountain with a servant to collect firewood.⁸ He climbed a withered pine tree, fell from a branch, and died. His spirit, which possessed a diviner,⁹ said, "Don't cremate me, but leave my corpse for seven days." In accord with this message, his corpse was carried from the mountain and placed outside, waiting for the appointed day.

On the seventh day he awoke and said to his family: "With five monks in front, and five lay brothers in the rear, I was going along a wide flat road as straight as a ruler. On both sides holy banners were raised, and a golden palace was in front. I asked them, 'What palace is this?' The lay brothers looked at each other, saying in whispers, 'This is the palace where your wife will be born. This palace was built as a reward for her merit of supporting the old ones. Do you know who we are?' I answered 'No.' Then, they revealed the fact, saying, 'You should know that the five monks and the five lay brothers are the ten oysters you paid for and set free.'

On either side of the palace gate stood a man with a horn on his forehead. They held up their swords ready to cut off my head, but the monks and lay brothers entreated them not to do so. Fragrant delicious food was served to both gatekeepers and all enjoyed the feast. During my seven days' stay inside I was so hungry and thirsty that my mouth was in flames. Then I was told, 'This is the penalty for your sin of disliking the old ones and not feeding them.' The monks and lay brothers escorted me back, and suddenly I awoke and found myself here."

After that the man gave alms as generously as the water moistens the land. The reward of saving living beings helps you, while the penalty of giving no alms returns to you in the form of hunger and thirst. We cannot help believing in the karmic retribution of good and evil.

1. Cf. *Konjaku monogatari shū* (XX, 17).

2. Present Takamatsu-shi, Kagawa-ken 香川縣高松市.

3. *Aya*, a Japanese reading of 漢 Han; an immigrant family. See Aston, "Nihongi," I, 265.

4. 著 *okina*, a man over sixty-six (*Ryō no gige*, "Koryō," Article 6) or sixty-five (*Shoku Nihongi*, XX, Tenpyō hōji 2:7:3), who was exempted from taxation.

5. 家口 *keku*, all members of the family; 口 is a numerary adjunct applied to men and animals.

6. The text appears to be corrupt at this point, for the subject of this sentence is the servant in the text, but it is likely that the master went out with the servant for fishing.

7. Five *to* of rice; one *to* is 0.51 bushel. It is an exorbitant price for ten oysters.

8. In this story it is unclear whether the benefactor is the master or the servant.

9. 卜者 *kamnagi*; see Chap. II(3)a, n. 124.